



Want a Pesticide License? You have to get past Shelby Richardson First

Release Date: May 8, 2014

Contact: Donna Gilson, 608-224-5130

donna.gilson@wi.gov

Jim Dick, Communications Director, 608-224-5020

jim.dick@wi.gov

Editors: The following is one in a series of stories on DATCP employees and the work they do.

MADISON – Shelby Richardson has all the answers.

At least she does if the questions are those on exams taken by Wisconsin's nearly 30,000 certified pesticide applicators.

Richardson is an office associate with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's pesticide program. She administers and scores exams for pesticide applicators in Wisconsin, makes certification cards for those who pass, and delivers the bad news to those who don't. In her spare time, she helps out with the paperwork for pesticide product registration, too.

If you want to apply any kind of pesticide commercially in Wisconsin – that is, for money -- you need to take a test every five years to get certified. In addition, you need to apply for a license annually. The requirement is the same whether you apply pesticides to kill weeds in lawns, spray crops from the air or on the ground, get rid of bed bugs in apartments, or inject trees to fight emerald ash borer and other pests. Private applicators – generally farmers who apply restricted-use pesticides to their crops – also must get certified.

The commercial exams are tailored to the specific types of pesticide applications the test-taker will be doing. They require studying ahead of time and are closed-book. Applicants get 90 minutes to complete the test, and must pass with 70 percent correct.

During the fall and winter, the tests are offered once a week at DATCP headquarters and only a few people take the tests each time. Numbers pick up in January as applicators gear up for the growing season. Beginning in March, the schedule changes to every Tuesday and Thursday through the growing season. Stations in Waukesha, Wausau, Green Bay, Eau Claire and Spooner also offer tests a couple of times a month, and all those answer sheets are shipped to Madison for Richardson to score and track.

One test-taker steps to the window to turn in his answer sheet. Richardson sends the sheet through a scanner. "You passed, Jeff," she tells him, and prints out a sheet with his results and two copies of a card proving he's certified. Overhearing her talking about her years on the job, he says, "You're not leaving, are you? I've been coming here and seeing you for 15 years."

That kind of relationship is par for the course. Even when the test score falls short, she says, "I've had guys get mad at the situation, but not at me." And, she adds, "I can count on one hand the number of times we've had to deal with cheating."

When she first began her job, Richardson recalls, people had to wait weeks or even months for their test scores and certification cards, because she scored the tests manually, made plastic cards on an



Shelby Richardson administers exams required to apply pesticides commercially.

embosser, and mailed them. Now technology gives those instant results and cards, saving time and mailing costs.

A database makes updating names and addresses and sending renewal notices far more efficient than when she started her job. And one of the biggest technological advances has come in the past year: an online system for scheduling exams. Now her customers can schedule tests on their own schedules, rather than having to do it by phone during office hours. It's especially helpful for the larger companies that have to schedule many employees, Richardson notes.

She seems like such a natural for her job that it might be easy to overlook her real talent: tug of war. Shelby Richardson has medaled six times in international competition, and she's lost count of the number of national medals she's won. She's achieved all this as part of the women's team she founded in Oregon, her hometown where she still lives with her husband, Dick, who used to coach the team. These days she's a coach herself, and president of the U.S. Tug of War Association, looking forward to hosting the 2014 world championships to be held in Madison this Labor Day Weekend. She even named her dog -- "a lovely boxer" -- Tug.

"Tug of war is the ultimate team sport. You have to trust in your teammates, knowing everyone's working as hard as you are, and no one's going to give up," she says.

Maybe the two worlds of work and tug of war aren't so different, though. Both call for teamwork. "I like working here," she says. "I like everybody. I never dread coming to work. I'm always busy when I'm here."

What's a bad day like? "They're all good. Just some are better."

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